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Expert Q&A: Employment Experiences of People with Speech Disabilities



Glenda Watson Hyatt smiles broadly at the camera, wearing a graduation gown. She sits in a mobility device on a stage with a crowd of other graduates visible behind her off-stage.

Social scientist Glenda Watson Hyatt recently completed her [master's thesis](#) as part of the Master of Applied Science in Mechanical & Materials Engineering from Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. Her thesis, entitled "Persistent Gaps and Promising Practices in Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining Canadians with Speech Disabilities," explores both positive and negative employment experiences of people with speech disabilities. Glenda's research was informed by her lived experience as an AAC user and her work experience through the years, most notably working with Communication Disabilities Access Canada (CDAC) and volunteering with the International Society for Augmentative and Alternative Communication (ISAAC) Canada. CommunicationFIRST had the opportunity to interview Glenda about her research and findings. The interview, which took place in January 2026, has been edited lightly for readability.

CommunicationFIRST: Glenda, what inspired your thesis topic?

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Glenda: My thesis topic was inspired by my experience seeking employment while living with cerebral palsy. **My physical disability was, for the most part, acknowledged and accommodated, but my speech disability was not.** Through my own experiences and witnessing the experiences of others with speech disabilities, I realized we faced pervasive attitudes and systemic barriers that led to employment barriers for people with speech disabilities. These realizations provided the basis for the research questions explored in my thesis: What are the gaps in current practices for recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with speech disabilities in Canada? And what are the promising practices in recruiting, hiring, and retaining people with speech disabilities in Canada?

CommunicationFIRST: What are the key takeaways of your thesis?

Glenda: Three distinct takeaways stand out:

1. Training about people with speech disabilities and those who use AAC is desperately needed by **recruiters, hiring managers, and employers.**
2. People with speech disabilities can be gainfully employed when **appropriate workplace accommodations** are implemented.
3. For the most part, accommodations for employees with speech disabilities are **no- or low-cost measures.**

CommunicationFIRST: What did your research find regarding the general relationship between a person’s employment experiences and their integration in the community? Does that relationship differ for people with speech disabilities?

Glenda: The experiences that participants shared suggested that greater ties to community can be instrumental in their job search and improving employment outcomes. However, when communication is the disability, these individuals may be socially isolated, with fewer ties to community. Current technology—such as email, online forums, and Zoom text chat—create opportunities for them to [connect and network online](#).

CommunicationFIRST: Your thesis mentioned that some Canadian disability-related laws and systems exclude mention of communication. In the US, [our community is not counted](#) in any systematic manner by federal or state governments, and in many states, communication is not explicitly included in formal measures of “activities of daily living.” This can make it more difficult for people with speech disabilities to access necessary communication supports and services. Can you explain how similar laws and systems in Canada impact people with speech disabilities there?



Glenda: As we all know, communication is essential in everyday life. Communication needs to be recognized as an activity of daily living (ADL). Without an effective method of communication, one cannot ask for or direct any assistance needed to perform ADLs, and cannot request or interact with supports and services.

In Canada, some accessibility legislation—such as the Accessible British Columbia Act (2021)—do not explicitly include “speech” or “communication” in the definition of “disability” or “impairment.” If an individual does not feel their disability is included in the definitions, they might **feel ineligible or not recognized, furthering the systemic exclusion experienced by people with speech disabilities.**

Statistics Canada has not included “speech disabilities” in the Canadian Survey on Disabilities (CSD) since 2006. [CSD data](#) is “used to plan services and programs required by persons with disabilities to participate fully in our society.” By not including speech disabilities in the CSD, these Canadians are often **overlooked in services and programs.**

CommunicationFIRST: Your research identifies systemic barriers to employment for people with speech disabilities. Can you describe these barriers?

Glenda: In the research, three distinct groups of systemic barriers became evident. The first systemic barrier is a lack of awareness, knowledge, and training about people with speech disabilities among recruiters, employers, and hiring managers. Practical training is needed, and awareness and knowledge needs to be reflected in the work culture. The second barrier is attitude, which manifests as disrespect, ableism, and belief in misinformation. Lastly, outdated labor and union laws, practice not reflecting policy, negative effects of government assistance programs, and ineffective human rights boards make up the third group of systemic barriers.

Individuals are typically left to navigate systemic barriers by self-advocating. In reality, remedies to these barriers need to occur at the [societal level](#).

CommunicationFIRST: Can you describe what you found regarding interpersonal barriers that people with speech disabilities face in employment settings? What insights do you have about how to navigate them?

Glenda: Interpersonal communication is essential during the job search process and in the workplace. When communication is the disability, interpersonal barriers appear in the form of **impatience, interruptions, dismissal, and/or disrespect.** Being proactive and



self-advocating may be necessary. One participant shared, “I let them know that I have a speech impediment, and ... to create space for me, to make sure that no one interrupts me.”

CommunicationFIRST: Can you describe some examples of ableism in the workplace that your research found?

Glenda: Participants shared that ableism appeared in various forms in the workplace. One participant expressed that she was treated as inferior by her co-workers because of her speech disability. Another participant was disrespected by co-workers underestimating him or talking down to him as if he were a three-year-old. A third participant felt pressured to work doubly as hard to prove her capabilities, which is a form of ableism because she shouldn't need to prove anything.

CommunicationFIRST: In your research, how did participants feel about disclosing their disabilities during their job searches? Do you have any recommendations for people with speech disabilities about whether and how to do this and what the potential outcomes might be?

Glenda: The age-old question about whether to disclose or not remains a dilemma for jobseekers with speech disabilities. As one participant explained, “If I disclose my disability in the cover letter, the chances of me receiving a pre-screening phone interview are so low. And if I don't mention my disability in the cover letter, I've had managers hang up on me when they found out that I have a disability.” Other participants had similar experiences.

For individuals with speech disabilities, disclosing in a written cover letter may seem like a proactive and accessible approach. Yet, [previous research](#) has shown that doing so can reduce the likelihood of being called for an interview by over 50%.

The next possible time for disclosing a disability is when being called for an interview. Participants shared that the phone is a barrier though, as people frequently hang up on them due to their speech disabilities.

Because a speech disability is often fairly obvious, my recommendation is to be proactive in disclosing—preferably in the cover letter where you have the space and freedom to write—and to **explain how you communicate and how a perceived weakness is actually a strength**. Close the letter welcoming the opportunity to be interviewed to discuss further.



CommunicationFIRST: Do you have advice for people with speech disabilities navigating a request for workplace accommodations, to encourage employers to have a positive attitude about us?

Glenda: This is a tricky question because participants' experiences indicated a range of situations when requesting workplace accommodations. One participant shared that her employer discussed possible accommodations during the interview. Two shared asking subtly or informally for accommodations after being hired. A fourth participant detailed the lengthy and onerous process she was forced to navigate, including obtaining letters from two medical doctors.

Yes, employers have a duty to provide reasonable accommodations, but as one participant pointed out: requesting accommodations—particularly for interviews—can negatively affect perceptions of eligibility and potentially lead to discrimination. In short, requesting accommodations could cost candidates a job. My advice is to **proceed proactively yet cautiously, depending upon the workplace environment.**

CommunicationFIRST: Did your research find any “red flags” people with speech disabilities should watch out for while applying for jobs?

Glenda: The participants did mention two potential “red flags” while applying for jobs. The first was the absence of genuine inclusion statements on corporate websites, and in recruitment materials and job postings. Participants indicated that they felt unwelcome when such statements were missing or were not inclusive of all types of disabilities. They also felt unwelcome when inclusion statements and policies were not put into practice. The second potential “red flag” was job postings that include superfluous requirements—such as “strong interpersonal communication skills”—without any indication that accommodations would be available. This was experienced as a deterrent or an implicit barrier when applying for a job.

CommunicationFIRST: Did your research result in any recommendations for employers who wish to adopt recruitment processes that are inclusive of people with speech disabilities?

Glenda: First, corporate websites, recruitment materials, and job postings should include genuine inclusion statements that should explicitly welcome candidates with all disabilities and clearly indicate that accommodations are available throughout the recruitment process. Participants emphasized the importance of **allowing for**



accommodations during interviews without placing the burden on the candidate to justify or defend their needs.

Second, employers should consider alternative evaluation methods instead of relying exclusively on traditional interviews. Written responses, work samples, practical demonstrations, or task-based assessments can provide a more accurate picture of a candidate's skills and suitability for a position, particularly when spoken communication is not central to the job. **Employers should value and evaluate capability over disability.**

Third, the approach and attitude of interviewers strongly shape the tone of the interview itself. When interviewers focus on strengths, suitable tasks, and potential accommodations, the process becomes more equitable and more effective. One participant suggested that interviewers should ask every interviewee the same question, **"What would help you become successful in your interview?"** This normalizes accommodation and removes the stigma of disclosure.

CommunicationFIRST: Specifically, what kind of interview process do you recommend to employers who are recruiting people with speech disabilities?

Glenda: Although not specifically explored in my research, I would suggest that any alternative evaluation methods, if needed, would take into consideration both the applicant's preferred communication method and the required tasks or functions of the position, in order to evaluate capabilities and strengths over disability.

CommunicationFIRST: What are the most important things your research suggests employers can do to retain employees with speech disabilities?

Glenda: Retaining employees with speech disabilities begins with maintaining a positive workplace. Participants explained that a top-down management strategy modelling inclusive hiring practices and focusing on abilities and strengths resulted in co-workers' acceptance and good relationships. **Viewing disability as an asset and valuing lived experience with a disability contributes to a positive work environment and retaining these employees.** Finally, employers can advance employees with speech disabilities to retain them and to **promote diversity and equity beyond entry-level positions.**

CommunicationFIRST: Do you have advice for people with speech disabilities who may want to pursue graduate school?

Glenda: From my experience, **more students with speech disabilities are [needed in graduate school](#), particularly in [research](#)-based programs.** I didn't find the work overly



hard; there was just an enormous amount of it. I'd suggest having potential strategies and accommodations in place early, even if they aren't all used. I'd also suggest having strong supports for maintaining school-life balance; I did not excel at this and was quite burnt out by the time I graduated.

CommunicationFIRST: Do you have any next steps or plans for the future you'd like to share?

Glenda: I am still exploring my options and considering where I might be of greatest service in furthering the employment of Canadians with speech disabilities.

CommunicationFIRST: Is there anything else you would like to share about your research, or about employment for people with speech disabilities?

Glenda: As this albeit small study demonstrates, meaningful employment of people with speech disabilities is possible when employers are open and willing to foster an inclusive and supportive workplace culture. **Increased awareness and training about people with speech disabilities, suitable accommodations, and relevant legislation are desperately needed** for this meaningful employment to occur.

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